

Grand Canyon National Park Bison Management Plan/ Environmental Impact Statement Public Scoping Frequently Asked Questions

1. Are bison a native species at Grand Canyon National Park?

Evidence exists that bison inhabited areas of the southwest, including Arizona, New Mexico and into Mexico, areas generally recognized as on the edge of the original range of bison. Archaeological evidence indicates that bison occasionally occurred within northern Arizona, and possibly within the current boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP), prior to the last Ice Age (i.e. >12,000 years ago). Pictographs of bison appear in Kanab Creek along the Arizona and Utah border and at one location on the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Arizona. Historical records indicate that Spanish explorers encountered a small bison herd in northern Arizona in the mid-1500s (south of the Colorado River), though no evidence indicates that bison occurred at GCNP during the past 450 years.

2. How did the current bison herd end up in the park?

Bison now found at GCNP are descendants of bison brought to Arizona in June 1906 by Charles “Buffalo” Jones, who bred them with cows in an attempt to create a superior, more robust breed of livestock, the “cattalo.” Jones received a permit to graze cattle and other big game animals on land the federal government made available on the Kaibab Plateau.

These federal lands eventually came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service between 1906 and 1919. In November 1906, the Grand Canyon Game Preserve was created along roughly the same boundaries as what is today the North Kaibab Ranger District and north of the Colorado River in GRCA. The authorization came from a June 1906, act of Congress titled “An Act for the protection of wild animals in the Grand Canyon Forest Reserve.” The act named “buffalo” specifically as a species worthy of protection. In 1908 the Kaibab National Forest was established (North Kaibab only). Later the same year, Grand Canyon National Monument was created. In 1919 the Grand Canyon National Park was established.

According to available information, by 1908 Charles Jones realized that the “cattalo” experiment was not as successful as he envisioned. Consequently, in 1909, he rounded up and sold all the animals he could.

Roughly 20 animals that Jones could not round up became the property of the Grand Canyon Cattle Company in House Rock Valley. In 1926, the state of Arizona purchased bison from the Grand Canyon Cattle Company and established the core herd in Arizona for what would become the House Rock Wildlife Area and the Raymond Wildlife Area in Flagstaff.

From 1928 to 1946, the USFS issued three permits to the AGFD for grazing bison in the south end of House Rock Valley. In 1950, in accordance with a memorandum of understanding amongst the USFS, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission, the Bureau of Land Management, and local stockmen, the Buffalo

Ranch Allotment was set aside as an area for long-term bison use. This area has since become known as the House Rock Wildlife Area (HRWA).

For the next 40 years, the bison herd remained largely confined to the HRWA. Herd size in the 1990s (based on AGFD bison counts from 1990 to 1997) ranged from between 69 and 96 head (post-hunt), which was consistent with the size recommended by the USFS and AGFD Allotment Plan for the area.

However, during the late 1990s, the bison began “pioneering” up to the top of the Kaibab Plateau and into GCNP. A combination of public hunt pressure, drought, wildfire, and reduced forage quality in House Rock Valley during the 1990s are thought to have contributed to the bison moving through Saddle Mountain Wilderness and onto the higher elevations of the Kaibab Plateau. As the home range of the bison expanded to include areas beyond HRWA, traditional bison hunt strategies became less effective and the herd grew beyond AGFD/USFS objectives. In 2012 the herd numbers were estimated at over 300, with the majority of the herd staying within GRCA yearlong.

3. Is there anything unique about the current bison herd when compared to other bison herds?

Bison that use GCNP are the descendants of early 20th century “cattalo” breeding efforts as well as additional bison introduced by Arizona at the House Rock Wildlife Area to improve overall herd genetics. Recent genetic testing indicates the current population continues to have historic cattle genetics, though no outward physical characteristics of cattle have been observed in over 20 years. Genetic science also indicates that these bison do not possess the highly diverse or unique genetics for furthering the conservation of the species, compared to other wild bison herds.

4. What is meant by management of ‘sustainable,’ ‘huntable,’ and ‘free-ranging’ bison?

The National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Arizona Game and Fish Department all have different missions to consider when undertaking bison management. However, generally, bison in the vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park are managed:

- By Arizona as a public trust wildlife resource towards a self-sustaining population retaining wild behavior;
- By Arizona on lands adjacent to the park as wildlife with public hunting as the primary population management approach;
- By USFS as wildlife in the HRWA and adjacent habitat to protect other resources and multiple uses, including cattle grazing, in accordance with the Kaibab National Forest Plan; and
- By NPS at GCNP as wildlife and to protect other park resources and values;
- For up to 90 animals on USFS lands concentrated within the HRWA using adaptive management techniques within habitat and resource capacity, which may include maintaining or improving vegetation conditions on Kaibab National Forest; and
- To retain natural selection processes and successful herd reproduction with minimal human intervention, except when supplementation may be needed to increase herd genetic diversity.

5. Are there concerns over disease transmission from bison to other wildlife or livestock?

The Arizona Game and Fish Department annually collects blood samples from harvested bison from the Raymond and House Rock bison herds to, among other things, test for two diseases of concern in bison:

Bovine brucellosis and Bovine tuberculosis (BTB). Both are bacterial infections that can cause reproductive problems in cattle and bison and can be transmitted by other wild ungulates such as elk. To date, neither bovine brucellosis nor BTB have been detected from either bison herd. No known disease outbreaks have been reported or observed during annual AGFD deer check station inspections of harvested deer either. Likewise, the Arizona Department of Agriculture State Veterinarian's Office indicates that neither of these diseases has been detected in cattle on and around the North Kaibab Plateau.

6. Why are the Bison Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement combined? What will this plan/EIS address?

When a federal agency prepares a plan like this one, it triggers the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and must consider the environmental impacts of its proposed action, and alternatives to that proposal, before making a decision on what action to take. NEPA also requires the NPS to involve the public when making decisions with the potential for environmental impacts. In this case, the NPS has determined that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should be prepared to complete the NEPA review for the bison management plan.

Regulations implementing NEPA encourage agencies to combine their NEPA and planning documents, which is what the NPS intends to do in the case of the Bison Management Plan and EIS. Each alternative presented when the draft plan/EIS is circulated for public review will represent a different 'plan' for managing bison.

When the EIS and decision-making processes are completed, the NPS will select an alternative that will become the Bison Management Plan for Grand Canyon National Park and will form the basis for NPS participation in a long-term interagency bison management strategy for the Kaibab Plateau.

7. Will changes to bison management outside the park be considered as part of this plan/EIS process?

Not at this time. The USFS/AGFD have jurisdiction for managing bison outside the park on Kaibab National Forest lands, and have valuable special expertise to offer the NPS in preparing this plan and EIS. As a result, the NPS has invited USFS/AGFD to be cooperating agencies in the NEPA process.

However, the USFS/AGFD do not intend to use this plan and EIS process to evaluate changes to their underlying agreements and planning documents which guide bison management on USFS lands. Nor does AGFD need to use a NEPA process to address things such as changes to bison hunting regulations.

Ultimately, any changes to bison management outside of the park would be at the discretion of USFS and AGFD, but would require close coordination with the NPS as the agencies work to implement a coordinated bison management strategy that meets the common goals and various mandates of each agency.

8. How does the NPS Bison Management Plan relate to the bison management activities of AGFD and USFS?

The NPS, USFS, and AGFD all have interest in cooperative bison management in the vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park. The agencies have been collaborating on research needs and administrative and operational challenges of long-term cooperative management through a Tri-Agency Working Group established in 2008. Their work will help inform the plan/EIS process currently underway. Ultimately, the Grand Canyon National Park Bison Management Plan will provide the basis for NPS participation in a long-term interagency bison management strategy for the Kaibab Plateau. This strategy would integrate the separate activities of NPS, AGFD, and USFS and is intended to ensure bison management activities meet the various mandates of each agency. The Tri-Agency Working Group will play an important role implementing and monitoring the success of this strategy.

NPS, AGFD, and USFS will maintain management authority on lands within their respective jurisdiction. For example, even though bison management activities may be coordinated, the NPS is responsible for implementing actions at Grand Canyon National Park. Likewise, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission is responsible for implementing bison management actions on the Kaibab National Forest, in accordance with USFS planning documents and USFS/AGFD/Bureau of Land Management agreements.

9. What bison management techniques will NPS consider? Will they include the potential for shooting bison in Grand Canyon National Park? If so, who will conduct these activities, and what will happen to the bison?

At this time, the NPS is evaluating all reasonable alternatives to be carried forward for detailed analysis in the EIS.

Any management tools considered, including lethal removal, would be managed by the NPS in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies regarding such activities in national parks. However, public, recreational hunting is not authorized in Grand Canyon National Park.

If deemed appropriate, the NPS could seek assistance with any bison management activities from other government agencies, contractors, or skilled volunteers who meet certain requirements, as determined by the NPS.

Should lethal management tools be implemented, the NPS would strive, to the extent practicable, to put bison lethally removed from the park to beneficial use.

The NPS will seek input from the public and other agencies about bison management techniques as part of scoping, and will provide details of those under consideration, when the draft plan/EIS is released.